

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

**Commencement Address at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend,
Indiana**

May 17, 2009

The President. Well, first of all, congratulations, class of 2009. Congratulations to all the parents, the cousins, the aunts, the uncles, the—all the people who helped to bring you to the point that you are here today. Thank you so much to Father Jenkins for that extraordinary introduction, even though you said what I want to say much more elegantly. *[Laughter]* You are doing an extraordinary job as president of this extraordinary institution. Your continued and courageous—and contagious—commitment to honest, thoughtful dialog is an inspiration to us all.

So good afternoon. To Father Hesburgh, to Notre Dame trustees, to faculty, to family: I am honored to be here today. And I am grateful to all of you for allowing me to be a part of your graduation.

And I also want to thank you for the honorary degree that I received. I know it has not been without controversy. I don't know if you're aware of this, but these honorary degrees are apparently pretty hard to come by. *[Laughter]* So far I'm only 1 for 2 as President. *[Laughter]* Father Hesburgh is 150 for 150. *[Laughter]* I guess that's better. *[Laughter]* So, Father Ted, after the ceremony, maybe you can give me some pointers to boost my average.

I also want to congratulate the class of 2009 for all your accomplishments. And since this is Notre Dame——

[At this point, there was a disturbance in the audience.]

Audience members. Booo!

The President. That's all right. And since——

Audience members. We are ND! We are ND!

Audience members. Yes we can! Yes we can!

The President. We're fine, everybody. We're following Brennan's adage that we don't do things easily. *[Laughter]* We want to—we're not going to shy away from things that are uncomfortable sometimes.

Now, since this is Notre Dame, I think we should talk not only about your accomplishments in the classroom, but also in the competitive arena. *[Laughter]* No, don't worry, I'm not going to talk about that. *[Laughter]* We all know about this university's proud and storied football team, but I also hear that Notre Dame holds the largest outdoor 5-on-5 basketball tournament in the world, Bookstore Basketball.

Now, this excites me. *[Laughter]* I want to congratulate the winners of this year's tournament, a team by the name of "Hallelujah Holla Back." *[Laughter]* Congratulations, well done. Though I have to say, I am personally disappointed that the "Barack O'Ballers" did not pull it out this year. *[Laughter]* So next year, if you need a 6'2" forward with a decent jumper, you know where I live. *[Laughter]*

Now, every one of you should be proud of what you have achieved at this institution. One hundred and sixty-three classes of Notre Dame graduates have sat where you sit today. Some were here during years that simply rolled into the next without much notice or fanfare, periods of relative peace and prosperity that required little by way of sacrifice or struggle.

You, however, are not getting off that easy. You have a different deal. Your class has come of age at a moment of great consequence for our Nation and for the world, a rare inflection point in history where the size and scope of the challenges before us require that we remake our world to renew its promise, that we align our deepest values and commitments to the demands of a new age. It's a privilege and a responsibility afforded to few generations and a task that you're now called to fulfill.

This generation, your generation, is the one that must find a path back to prosperity and decide how we respond to a global economy that left millions behind even before the most recent crisis hit, an economy where greed and short-term thinking were too often rewarded at the expense of fairness and diligence and an honest day's work.

Your generation must decide how to save God's creation from a changing climate that threatens to destroy it. Your generation must seek peace at a time when there are those who will stop at nothing to do us harm, and when weapons in the hands of a few can destroy the many. And we must find a way to reconcile our ever-shrinking world with its ever-growing diversity: diversity of thought, diversity of culture, and diversity of belief. In short, we must find a way to live together as one human family.

And it's this last challenge that I'd like to talk about today, despite the fact that Father John stole all my best lines. [*Laughter*] For the major threats we face in the 21st century—whether it's global recession or violent extremism, the spread of nuclear weapons or pandemic disease—these things do not discriminate. They do not recognize borders. They do not see color. They do not target specific ethnic groups.

Moreover, no one person or religion or nation can meet these challenges alone. Our very survival has never required greater cooperation and greater understanding among all people from all places than at this moment in history.

Unfortunately, finding that common ground, recognizing that our fates are tied up, as Dr. King said, in a "single garment of destiny," is not easy. And part of the problem, of course, lies in the imperfections of man: our selfishness, our pride, our stubbornness, our acquisitiveness, our insecurities, our egos, all the cruelties large and small that those of us in the Christian tradition understand to be rooted in original sin. We too often seek advantage over others. We cling to outworn prejudice and fear those who are unfamiliar. Too many of us view life only through the lens of immediate self-interest and crass materialism, in which the world is necessarily a zero-sum game. The strong too often dominate the weak, and too many of those with wealth and with power find all manner of justification for their own privilege in the face of poverty and injustice. And so, for all our technological and scientific advances, we see here in this country and around the globe violence and want and strife that would seem sadly familiar to those in ancient times.

We know these things, and hopefully, one of the benefits of the wonderful education that you've received here at Notre Dame is that you've had time to consider these wrongs in the world, perhaps recognized impulses in yourself that you want to leave behind. You've grown determined, each in your own way, to right them. And yet, one of the vexing things for those of us interested in promoting greater understanding and cooperation among people is the

discovery that even bringing together persons of good will, bringing together men and women of principle and purpose, even accomplishing that can be difficult.

The soldier and the lawyer may both love this country with equal passion, and yet reach very different conclusions on the specific steps needed to protect us from harm. The gay activist and the evangelical pastor may both deplore the ravages of HIV/AIDS, but find themselves unable to bridge the cultural divide that might unite their efforts. Those who speak out against stem cell research may be rooted in an admirable conviction about the sacredness of life, but so are the parents of a child with juvenile diabetes who are convinced that their son's or daughter's hardships might be relieved.

The question then is, how do we work through these conflicts? Is it possible for us to join hands in common effort? As citizens of a vibrant and varied democracy, how do we engage in vigorous debate? How does each of us remain firm in our principles and fight for what we consider right, without, as Father John said, "demonizing those with just as strongly held convictions on the other side"?

And of course, nowhere do these questions come up more powerfully than on the issue of abortion. As I considered the controversy surrounding my visit here, I was reminded of an encounter I had during my Senate campaign, one that I describe in a book I wrote called "The Audacity of Hope." And a few days after the Democratic nomination, I received an e-mail from a doctor who told me that while he voted for me in the Illinois primary, he had a serious concern that might prevent him from voting for me in the general election. He described himself as a Christian who was strongly pro-life, but that was not what was preventing him, potentially, from voting for me.

What bothered the doctor was an entry that my campaign staff had posted on my web site, an entry that said I would fight, quote, "right-wing ideologues who want to take away a woman's right to choose," unquote. The doctor said he had assumed I was a reasonable person, he supported my policy initiatives to help the poor and to lift up our educational system, but that if I truly believed that every pro-life individual was simply an ideologue who wanted to inflict suffering on women, then I was not very reasonable. He wrote, "I do not ask at this point that you oppose abortion, only that you speak about this issue in fair-minded words"—fair-minded words.

After I read the doctor's letter, I wrote back to him, and I thanked him. And I didn't change my underlying position, but I did tell my staff to change the words on my web site. And I said a prayer that night that I might extend the same presumption of good faith to others that the doctor had extended to me. Because when we do that, when we open up our hearts and our minds to those who may not think precisely like we do or believe precisely what we believe, that's when we discover at least the possibility of common ground.

That's when we begin to say, maybe we won't agree on abortion, but we can still agree that this heart-wrenching decision for any woman is not made casually, that it has both moral and spiritual dimensions.

So let us work together to reduce the number of women seeking abortions; let's reduce unintended pregnancies. Let's make adoption more available. Let's provide care and support for women who do carry their children to term. Let's honor the conscience of those who disagree with abortion, and draft a sensible conscience clause, and make sure that all of our health care policies are grounded not only in sound science, but also in clear ethics, as well as respect for the equality of women. Those are things we can do.

Now, understand, class of 2009, I do not suggest that the debate surrounding abortion can or should go away. Because no matter how much we may want to fudge it—indeed, while we know that the views of most Americans on the subject are complex and even contradictory—the fact is that at some level, the views of the two camps are irreconcilable. Each side will continue to make its case to the public with passion and conviction. But surely we can do so without reducing those with differing views to caricature.

Open hearts, open minds, fair-minded words, it's a way of life that has always been the Notre Dame tradition. Father Hesburgh has long spoken of this institution as both a lighthouse and a crossroads, a lighthouse that stands apart, shining with the wisdom of the Catholic tradition, while the crossroads is where "differences of culture and religion and conviction can coexist with friendship, civility, hospitality, and especially love." And I want to join him and Father John in saying how inspired I am by the maturity and responsibility with which this class has approached the debate surrounding today's ceremony. You are an exemplar of what Notre Dame is about.

Now, this tradition of cooperation and understanding is one that I learned in my own life many years ago—also with the help of the Catholic Church. You see, I was not raised in a particularly religious household, but my mother instilled in me a sense of service and empathy that eventually led me to become a community organizer after I graduated college. And a group of Catholic churches in Chicago helped fund an organization known as the Developing Communities Project, and we worked to lift up south side neighborhoods that had been devastated when the local steel plant closed.

And it was quite an eclectic crew—Catholic and Protestant churches, Jewish and African American organizers, working class black, white, and Hispanic residents—all of us with different experiences, all of us with different beliefs. But all of us learned to work side by side, because all of us saw in these neighborhoods other human beings who needed our help to find jobs and improve schools. We were bound together in the service of others.

And something else happened during the time I spent in these neighborhoods, perhaps because the church folks I worked with were so welcoming and understanding; perhaps because they invited me to their services and sang with me from their hymnals; perhaps because I was really broke and they fed me. [Laughter] Perhaps because I witnessed all of the good works their faith inspired them to perform, I found myself drawn not just to the work with the church, I was drawn to be in the church. It was through this service that I was brought to Christ.

And at the time, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin was the Archbishop of Chicago. And for those of you too young to have known him or known of him, he was a kind and good and wise man, a saintly man. I can still remember him speaking at one of the first organizing meetings I attended on the south side. He stood as both a lighthouse and a crossroads, unafraid to speak his mind on moral issues ranging from poverty and AIDS and abortion to the death penalty and nuclear war. And yet, he was congenial and gentle in his persuasion, always trying to bring people together, always trying to find common ground. And just before he died, a reporter asked Cardinal Bernardin about this approach to his ministry. And he said, "You can't really get on with preaching the Gospel until you've touched hearts and minds."

My heart and mind were touched by him. They were touched by the words and deeds of the men and women I worked alongside in parishes across Chicago. And I'd like to think that we touched the hearts and minds of the neighborhood families whose lives we helped change. For this, I believe, is our highest calling.

Now, you, class of 2009, are about to enter the next phase of your life at a time of great uncertainty. You'll be called to help restore a free market that's also fair to all who are willing to work. You'll be called to seek new sources of energy that can save our planet, to give future generations the same chance that you had to receive an extraordinary education. And whether as a person drawn to public service or simply someone who insists on being an active citizen, you will be exposed to more opinions and ideas broadcast through more means of communication than ever existed before. You'll hear talking heads scream on cable, and you'll read blogs that claim definitive knowledge, and you will watch politicians pretend they know what they're talking about. [Laughter] Occasionally, you may have the great fortune of actually seeing important issues debated by people who do know what they're talking about, by well-intentioned people with brilliant minds and mastery of the facts. In fact, I suspect that some of you will be among those brightest stars.

And in this world of competing claims about what is right and what is true, have confidence in the values with which you've been raised and educated. Be unafraid to speak your mind when those values are at stake. Hold firm to your faith and allow it to guide you on your journey. In other words, stand as a lighthouse.

But remember, too, that you can be a crossroads. Remember, too, that the ultimate irony of faith is that it necessarily admits doubt. It's the belief in things not seen. It's beyond our capacity as human beings to know with certainty what God has planned for us or what He asks of us. And those of us who believe must trust that His wisdom is greater than our own.

And this doubt should not push us away our faith. But it should humble us. It should temper our passions, cause us to be wary of too much self-righteousness. It should compel us to remain open and curious and eager to continue the spiritual and moral debate that began for so many of you within the walls of Notre Dame. And within our vast democracy, this doubt should remind us even as we cling to our faith to persuade through reason, through an appeal whenever we can to universal rather than parochial principles, and most of all, through an abiding example of good works and charity and kindness and service that moves hearts and minds.

For if there is one law that we can be most certain of, it is the law that binds people of all faiths and no faith together. It's no coincidence that it exists in Christianity and Judaism, in Islam and Hinduism, in Buddhism and humanism. It is, of course, the Golden Rule: the call to treat one another as we wish to be treated, the call to love, the call to serve, to do what we can to make a difference in the lives of those with whom we share the same brief moment on this Earth.

So many of you at Notre Dame—by the last count, upwards of 80 percent—have lived this law of love through the service you've performed at schools and hospitals, international relief agencies and local charities. Brennan is just one example of what your class has accomplished. That's incredibly impressive, a powerful testament to this institution.

Now you must carry the tradition forward. Make it a way of life. Because when you serve, it doesn't just improve your community, it makes you a part of your community. It breaks down walls. It fosters cooperation. And when that happens, when people set aside their differences, even for a moment, to work in common effort toward a common goal, when they struggle together, and sacrifice together, and learn from one another, then all things are possible.

After all, I stand here today, as President and as an African American, on the 55th anniversary of the day that the Supreme Court handed down the decision in *Brown v. Board of*

Education. Now, *Brown* was, of course, the first major step in dismantling the "separate but equal" doctrine, but it would take a number of years and a nationwide movement to fully realize the dream of civil rights for all of God's children. There were freedom rides and lunch counters and billy clubs; there was also a Civil Rights Commission appointed by President Eisenhower. It was the 12 resolutions recommended by this commission that would ultimately become law in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

There were six members of this commission. It included five whites and one African American, Democrats and Republicans: two southern Governors, the dean of a southern law school, a midwestern university president, and your own Father Ted Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame. So they worked for 2 years, and at times, President Eisenhower had to intervene personally since no hotel or restaurant in the South would serve the black and white members of the commission together. And finally, when they reached an impasse in Louisiana, Father Ted flew them all to Notre Dame's retreat in Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin, where they eventually overcame their differences and hammered out a final deal.

And years later, President Eisenhower asked Father Ted how on Earth he was able to broker an agreement between men of such different backgrounds and beliefs. And Father Ted simply said that during their first dinner in Wisconsin, they discovered they were all fishermen. [*Laughter*] And so he quickly readied a boat for a twilight trip out on the lake. And they fished, and they talked, and they changed the course of history.

Now, I will not pretend that the challenges we face will be easy, or that the answers will come quickly, or that all our differences and divisions will fade happily away, because life is not that simple. It never has been.

But as you leave here today, remember the lessons of Cardinal Bernardin, of Father Hesburgh, of movements for change both large and small. Remember that each of us, endowed with the dignity possessed by all children of God, has the grace to recognize ourselves in one another, to understand that we all seek the same love of family, the same fulfillment of a life well lived. Remember that in the end, in some way, we are all fishermen.

If nothing else, that knowledge should give us faith that through our collective labor, and God's providence, and our willingness to shoulder each other's burdens, America will continue on its precious journey towards that more perfect Union.

Congratulations, class of 2009. May God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:06 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to E. Brennan Bollman, class of 2009 valedictorian, University of Notre Dame.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : University of Notre Dame, commencement address in South Bend, IN.

Locations: South Bend, IN.

Names: Bollman, E. Brennan; Hesburgh, Theodore M.; Jenkins, John I.

Subjects: Arms and munitions : Nuclear weapons and material :: Nonproliferation efforts; Commerce, international : Global financial markets :: Unrest; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies; Environment : Climate change ; Health and medical care : Abortion; Indiana : President's visits; Indiana : University of

Notre Dame in South Bend; Science and technology : Stem cell research; Terrorism : Global threat; Voluntarism.

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